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ABSTRACT

Two innovative approaches to delivering vocational education and training (VET) in schools were examined to identify ways of helping Australia's indigenous students achieve academic success by ensuring a close cultural fit between course content and the realities of local employment opportunities. The first VET-in-School program, which was located in New South Wales, provided three levels of health care studies in courses that were carefully structured to include the entire necessary curriculum to meet accreditation standards and emphasize literacy and numeracy skills while explicitly acknowledging that Aboriginal English is respected as a functional form of English communication. The second program, which was located in Western Australia, offered a hospitality and tourism training program that combined a cluster of accredited general secondary studies subjects in years 11 and 12 with a selection of Australian Qualifications Framework modules related to hospitality and tourism and hands-on training in the workplace. Both courses proved successful in attracting and retaining indigenous students. Factors credited with the programs' success included the following: opportunities for community-based education and training; community relevance; a commitment to Aboriginal employment; balancing of expectations from two cultures; a willingness to push the boundaries; and the presence of leadership and a committed, competent staff. (Contains 22 references.) (MN)

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VET-in-School for Indigenous students: success through 'cultural fit'

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Research shows a persistent and troubling drop in retention as Indigenous students move toward the post-compulsory years, and a relative over-representation of Indigenous students in vocationally oriented school courses. While some have expressed concern at what appears to be a lack of engagement with academic courses, there is no doubt that many young Indigenous people are purposefully pursuing the practical, hands-on learning VET-in-School courses can provide.

Typically, vocational subjects are either delivered in school by teachers who have gained the necessary accreditation to teach those subjects or, when that's not possible, students leave school early and enrol in technical and further education (TAFE). Both of these approaches can be successful, but they also present significant challenges to the many Indigenous students who are alienated from school and yet lack the confidence or maturity to venture out into the world of TAFE. This paper reports on recent research into the success of two innovative yet very different approaches to the delivery of VET-in-School; one focused on hospitality and tourism and the other on health care. These programs have been successful because they stretch the boundaries of VET-in-School and ensure a close cultural fit between course content and the realities of local employment opportunities.

Research shows a persistent and troubling drop in retention as Indigenous students move toward the post-compulsory years of schooling (Long et al 1999; Schwab 1999). At the same time, Indigenous students are over-represented in vocationally oriented school courses (Ainley et al 1994; Gray et al 2000). While some have expressed concern at what appears to be a lack of engagement with academic courses, there is no doubt that many young Indigenous people are purposefully pursuing the practical, hands-on learning VET-in-School courses can provide (Groome and Hamilton 1995; Robinson and Hughes 1999; Schwab 1998; Teasdale and Teasdale 1996).

Typically, vocational subjects are either delivered in school by teachers who have gained the necessary accreditation to teach those subjects or, when that is not possible, students leave school early and enrol in TAFE. Both of these approaches can be successful, but they also present significant challenges to many Indigenous students who are alienated from school and lack the confidence or maturity to venture out into the world of TAFE. In addition, while vocational education is increasingly popular with Indigenous students, not all forms provide the appropriate cultural 'fit'. While vocational education and training (VET) may be a viable alternative for some students who have not experienced success in mainstream academic programs, finding a vocational option that fits within the local cultural

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context and aligns with the interests and needs of these students is a significant challenge.

This paper is derived from recent research into the success of two innovative yet very different approaches to the delivery of VET-in-School; one focused on health care (Booroongen Djugun College in Kempsey) and the other on hospitality and tourism (St Mary's College in Broome). Part of a larger project on post-compulsory success among Indigenous young people undertaken as part of a Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) Research Fellowship, the sites for the two case studies presented below were selected after broad ranging consultation with a variety of stakeholders. The sites were identified with advice from DETYA officers in Canberra and in various State and Territory offices. In addition, recommendations were made by various State and Territory education department officers and advice was provided by Indigenous consultative bodies across the country.

The programs discussed below were identified as exceptional in terms of engaging students or in developing programs to enhance Indigenous senior secondary (or equivalent) outcomes. Data were collected through participant observation and interviews with students, teachers, parents, community members and education administrators. In addition, various institutional documents were collected and analysed. Five days were spent in each site, with additional follow-up information collected after the completion of fieldwork. The case studies are intended to highlight the personal, school and community factors associated with successful post-compulsory outcomes for young Indigenous people. The programs described below have been successful because they stretch the boundaries of VET-in-School and ensure a close cultural fit between course delivery, content, student aspirations and the realities of local employment opportunities.

Booroongen Djugun College

Kempsey is located on the Mid-North Coast of New South Wales, one of the state's fastest growing non-metropolitan regions. Situated in the Macleay River valley, it is roughly half-way between Sydney and Brisbane and is the traditional country of the *Dunghutti* and *Gumaynggirr* people. The town population is close to 10,000 and Indigenous people comprise about 14% of the total population. The Macleay Valley is often described as economically depressed, and Indigenous unemployment is about 39%. Developing marketable skills is a challenge in any community, but this is particularly important in a town like Kempsey where jobs are few.

Booroongen Djugun College was established in 1994 as an independent adult education institution focused on the needs of Indigenous people in the region. The first accredited courses developed and offered by the college were Certificates in Community Care Nursing and Community Care Ancillary Services. These courses were developed in response to Indigenous community interests and desires to attend to the social and physical needs of elderly Indigenous people in the region. Through these courses, a pool of qualified graduates were available to staff the Booroongen Djugun Aged Care Facility when it opened in 1997; the College established its own facilities on the same grounds that same year. The Aged Care Facility is a first class residential care operation providing accommodation for 60 individuals. Constructed of rammed earth and designed to embrace and reflect Aboriginal totems of fire, water, earth and sun, the facility runs at full capacity with a long waiting list and 60

staff members. With a lengthy list of commendations and awards, the facility is setting standards for aged care in the region.

The College aims to provide practical training for individuals that will lead not only to employment but also assist with developing a career. A core assumption underpinning Booroongen Djugun programs is that the College is a community institution and as such should provide intellectual and practical skills for social action; the College is a means to individual and community empowerment. In this sense, the College sees itself as an instrument of social change, providing skills for personal and community development. Indigenous traditions and customs are married with sound pedagogy to enable learning that fits comfortably with the cultural backgrounds of Indigenous students, many of whom have never felt totally at ease with mainstream education. Course modules are structured and delivered to address what staff refer to as 'Aboriginal learning styles', and theory-based lectures are complemented by hands-on, observation-based learning. Students work through modules that emphasise the practical side of knowledge necessary for particular tasks, delivered through lectures and audiovisual presentations and reinforced through discussion and role-plays.

Health care studies

The VET-in-School program comprises three different levels of health care studies: non-vocational health care 'taster' courses for year 9 students; pre-vocational studies in community care for year 10 students; and full vocational courses in nursing and aged care for students in years 11 and 12. All are approved and accredited by the New South Wales Board of Studies and all lead to AQF Certificates.

Participating high school students in the Macleay Valley attend classes at Booroongen Djugun College one day a week. The morning involves a range of activities including lectures, audio/visual presentations, demonstrations and completion of study modules. The afternoon session is conducted in the Aged Care Facility next door, where students have the opportunity to practice what they have learned under the guidance of both their teachers and qualified Facility staff; the practical experience students gain is then discussed and re-examined in the classroom. This cycle of instruction, practice and reflection is referred to by Booroongen Djugun staff as 'circular learning' and is one of the key learning strategies offered to students.

The content of the courses is carefully structured to include all the necessary curriculum to meet accreditation standards. For example, students study human physiology and anatomy but they also learn a range of practical skills such as shaving a patient who is unable to shave himself, lifting a bedridden person, and assisting with meals. In addition, there is a particular emphasis on problem solving and communication to enable students to work both independently and with other staff in health care settings. Early modules of study lead to a First Aid qualification and Occupational Health and Safety issues and practices are threaded through all the course materials and hands-on training sessions. All the study modules emphasise literacy and numeracy skills, yet there is an explicit acknowledgement that Aboriginal English, spoken by many of the College's students, is respected as a functional form of English communication. Study is structured by course modules but also includes self-paced learning components, which allow students to work

through and review materials at a rate that best suits their needs and particular circumstances.

In lectures, written course materials and 'on the ground' work placements, there is an explicit emphasis on the value and importance of Indigenous culture and identity, reaffirmed by the involvement of Indigenous staff, local Elders and community leaders. While the course emphasises the fundamentals of caring for patients, teachers never lose sight of the fact that the College is an Aboriginal institution. In addition, an explicit valuing of multiculturalism underpins all training in health care. Both of these appear to be crucial ingredients in the success of the program.

Students emphasise the immediate and practical benefits of the courses. They referred to the many and varied advantages this particular style of vocational education provides in allowing them to experience the realities of a job. They appreciate the opportunity to take direct responsibility for study, the relative independence afforded them and the practical hands-on training of immediate relevance. They anticipate an easier transition to the world of work because they will have practical experience and qualifications recognised across the country. Many of the Indigenous students say that without the Booroongen Djugun program they would have left school early. They refer to teasing and racism in their home high school in contrast to a program that is 'theirs' and that validates their cultural experience as Indigenous people. This appears to have a marked effect on their desire to participate in education and training and succeed in their studies.

Outcomes

In the year 2000 there were 54 Indigenous students in years 10-12 enrolled for study in the three high schools in the Macleay Valley. Of these students, 27 (50%) were enrolled for VET-in-School studies through Booroongen Djugun. In other words, half of all the post-compulsory high school students in the Valley chose to participate in VET-in-School studies at an independent, community-controlled Aboriginal college. Of those students enrolled in 1999, over 90% of the Macleay Valley students returned to the College to continue their study in 2000. The overall completion rate for these students was 77%. That over three out of four students in this age cohort completed these studies is remarkable by any measure. Overall, enrolments of Indigenous students at the College in the age group 15-19 grew from 29 to 43 between 1998 and 1999. These students accounted for 26% of all College students in 1998 and 16% in 1999.

Though the College has been unable to track the employment outcomes for graduating students, aged care is a growth industry in the region and virtually any student with qualifications would find jobs in the region for which they could apply. The Booroongen Djugun Nursing home, for example, has 70 staff positions and has a difficult time filling the jobs with College graduates because they are in such high demand.

St Mary's College

Located 2,200 km from Perth and 1900 km from Darwin, Broome is situated in a lush region of turquoise seas, red cliffs, palm and mango trees and low, scrubby dunes. The weather during the 'dry' season is nearly perfect, or so would say the tourists

who swell the town's population by three fold during winter. The tropical 'wet' season, running from roughly October to March, is replete with hot, sticky afternoons, monsoonal rains and occasional cyclones. Broome's population is just over 10,000 people, with nearly 20% identifying themselves as Indigenous. Pearling and tourism provide the economic foundation for Broome. Over 16% of Indigenous people in Broome are unemployed, compared to about 7% of the rest of the community.

Part of the West Australian Catholic Education system, St Mary's College is a co-educational institution with both primary and secondary campuses. Overall, secondary student enrolments have increased by 39% (from 114 to 158) between 1995 and 2000. While four out of five students are Indigenous, there has been a shift occurring as increasing numbers of non-Indigenous students are choosing to enrol at St Mary's rather than the local government high school. In the year 2000, there were 27 Indigenous students in year 10, 17 in year 11 and nine in year 12.

St Mary's has initiated a range of special programs to attempt to meet the specific needs of Indigenous students, all of whom are at-risk – for various reasons – of leaving school early. The programs are linked in their ultimate aim to keep students in school and equip them to contribute to their families, communities and the rest of the nation. There are several impressive programs at St Mary's, but this paper will highlight only one: the Hospitality and Tourism Training Program.

Hospitality and Tourism Training Program

One of the critical issues for young Indigenous people in Broome is employment. Though Broome is growing, it is in fact an extremely isolated small town with a limited range of employment opportunities. A challenge for educators, beyond the provision of State required curricula, is to provide course options that fit both the interests of Indigenous students and the economic realities of the region. Intent on expanding vocational offerings, St Mary's staff did research to find what industries were growing in the region, and concluded that tourism showed the greatest promise in providing jobs to young Indigenous people in the area.

The Hospitality and Tourism Training program combines a cluster of accredited general secondary studies subjects in years 11 and 12, a selection of AQF modules related to Hospitality and Tourism and hands-on training in the workplace. At the conclusion of the course, a student is eligible for secondary graduation and will have completed a range of modules that would contribute toward the attainment of a full Certificate if the student chose to continue studies beyond school. The program was developed in collaboration with, and modules are delivered by, the Kimberley College of TAFE on St Mary's campus.

The course is structured to allow a maximum focus on the subject, so that students spend one full school day a week learning about and developing skills for employment in the Hospitality and Tourism industry. Through a combination of lectures, readings and hands-on experience, students quickly learn the realities of the industry. Learning by doing and learning by seeing the reality first hand, is behind much of the student enthusiasm for the course. Regular field visits are an important part of the course as well and students have frequent opportunities to visit local hospitality and tourism operations, including Indigenous tourism enterprises. For

example, last year students visited a range of Broome's accommodation offerings, from backpacker hostel to five-star resort. They studied Indigenous fishing and mud crabbing tour operations, visited pearling facilities, and toured a cruise liner docked in Broome.

The year 12 students also travelled to Perth to study Hospitality and Tourism in another setting. In Perth they visited a range of hospitality and tourism venues including several major hotels, Qantas In-flight catering, and the Playhouse theatre. In addition, they met with staff of the WA Tourism Commission, and undertook placements at the Terrace Hotel on the Swan River where they had opportunities to observe operations in the various departments and divisions.

Outcomes

The Hospitality and Tourism program has been highly successful in a number of ways. It has attracted growing numbers of Indigenous students and engaged them at years 11 and 12 when most of their peers across the country have left school. In the year 2000 there were 15 at-risk Indigenous students enrolled and ten completed the year. The program is so attractive to students that it is a major challenge for the College to keep the academic stream alive. The program incorporates a hands-on, practical approach to learning that many Indigenous students excel at. Finally, it is closely linked to the local community and a vibrant and growing industry in which Indigenous people play a major role. In this way, the Hospitality and Tourism Program has attained a close cultural fit with the interests and aspirations of students who have first-hand experience with family and friends who have secured meaningful jobs in the local and regional industry. Students who hope to work in the field have plenty of evidence around them to indicate their aspirations are realistic and achievable; this has had a significant impact on student engagement and their willingness to remain in school.

Attendance at St Mary's has been improving in the past two or three years and the truancy rate is currently between 2-3%. In addition, it is clear from interviews with teachers and students that St Mary's students are gaining confidence and self-esteem through the Hospitality and Tourism program. These are students who are at-risk, who – according to abstract demographic profiles – would be most likely to leave school. Yet these same students are attending and participating enthusiastically in school and, perhaps most significantly, perceiving and evaluating a range of real opportunities in their future.

What seems to matter?

Enabling and facilitating the educational successes of young Indigenous people is a complex endeavour and it is difficult to identify any single ingredient that makes 'the' difference. Still, it is possible to draw some valuable lessons from the programs at St Mary's College and Booroongen Djugun. It appears there is a range of factors that have contributed to student success – all of them are interlinked and all relate to attaining a cultural fit. The notion of cultural fit revolves around the alignment of curriculum, delivery and pedagogy with local Indigenous cultural assumptions, perceptions, values and needs (Schwab 1998; Schwab 2001). For education and training to succeed, this alignment is essential.

Research has shown that this alignment can be achieved through programs and approaches that recognise Indigenous culture and values within a learning environment that preserves and reinforces Indigenous identity and provides a range of culturally appropriate mechanisms for support (Boughton and Duran 1997; Day 1994; McIntyre et al 1996; Munns et al 1996; Nakata 1993; Rigney et al 1988; Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee 2000). In addition, cultural fit may be assisted by programs that grow out of and/or support Indigenous community goals (Durnan and Boughton 1999; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1997) and recognise that some Indigenous students appear to have different 'learning styles' that require approaches to teaching and training that differ from those traditionally used in classrooms and workplaces (Harris 1984; Hughes 1988).

While the last point is somewhat contentious among educational researchers (Nakata 1995; Nicholls et al 1996), there is no question that sensitivity to cultural difference is a key ingredient for successful programs. Distilling the lessons from the two cases presented above, there appear to be a range of factors that merit close consideration when looking for ways to facilitate success among Indigenous students in Vet-in-School programs:

Community-based education and training

The importance of education and training that is community-based was consistently referred to by students, staff and community members in both settings. Many of the young people who are enrolled to study in the two programs have had little previous success in mainstream schools, yet study in an institution recognised as an extension of the Indigenous community has in these cases had a very positive effect in encouraging - both in communities and among students - a sense of ownership of the programs. Ownership, it would appear, is closely tied to engagement and ultimately to successful outcomes.

Community relevance

Indigenous post-compulsory students are often drawn to practical fields of study which will allow them to return to their communities to work. In some cases this has to do with a lack of confidence in the workplace and a desire to work in settings that are culturally comfortable. In other cases it has to do with a deep desire to work for the betterment of one's community. The courses at Booroongen Djugun fit perfectly with these patterns and allow students to study for careers that are of immediate relevance and highly valued by the Indigenous community. Equally important, the curriculum and course structure in College courses arise out of the needs identified by the local community. Similarly, the courses at St Mary's College link to an industry local Aboriginal people value and already feel connected to. Aboriginal people are employed throughout the region in the industry and there are many examples of Aboriginal cultural tourism operations already succeeding. Consequently, the Hospitality and Tourism program is seen as immediately relevant and of value to the wider Aboriginal community.

A commitment to Aboriginal employment

Both programs maintain that their goal is to provide students with opportunities to develop skills that will enable them to move out of the classroom and into jobs. While qualifications are highly valued, they are not a goal in and of themselves.

Employment is the ultimate goal. This orientation shapes course materials and delivery and students appear to adopt this perspective in their studies. There is nothing abstract about these programs. The focus is on jobs, and students understand and are working toward that end.

Balancing expectations from two cultures

Staff in both institutions articulate a clear approach to teaching that encourages students by acknowledging and supporting their cultural heritage and by providing course structures and materials that fit their preferred learning styles. Yet firm expectations about attendance and participation are incorporated in the programs, and students are not allowed to complete their studies without fulfilling highly specific, industry-defined requirements. In this sense, both institutions have succeeded in finding a balance between the sometimes conflicting styles and expectations of two cultures so that the desired outcome – jobs – can be obtained.

Pushing the boundaries

Booroongen Djugun and St Mary's College are remarkable in variety of ways, but they are particularly impressive in pushing boundaries as educational institutions. Both emphasise the need for hands-on learning, and as a result, students spend significant amounts of time outside the classroom learning about the workplace. Yet, moving beyond the walls of the classroom requires additional effort by teachers and additional resources to support the field study components. Both institutions are highly entrepreneurial, have built strategic partnerships with other institutions and are particularly skilled in locating and securing supplementary funding to support their programs.

Leadership and committed, competent staff

Leadership in both institutions is exceptional in finely balancing the need to be in and of the local Indigenous community – in both identifying and being responsive to community education and training needs – with the need to be independent, efficient and innovative. Both VET-in-School programs arose out of clearly identified community needs. With clear goals and broad support, they have also succeeded in drawing together competent and committed staff to assist in expanding and extending programs to meet the education and training needs of Indigenous people throughout their regions.

Conclusion

These are two examples of exemplary programs that have been successful because they stretch the boundaries of VET-in-School and ensure a close cultural fit between course delivery, content, student aspirations and the realities of local employment opportunities. They are community-based and focused on realistic employment outcomes that are considered relevant by both students and their communities. They both have strong leadership and committed staff, they are highly strategic and entrepreneurial, and yet they have found a balance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous styles and expectations. No single one of these characteristics or qualities would have been sufficient to bring about the success of these programs, yet together, they combine to achieve impressive advances in a crucially important area and offer important insights for VET-in-School programs across the nation.

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